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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NICOSIA 000849

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/22/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [CY](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: CAUTIOUS CHRISTOFIAS REVEALS LITTLE ON CAMPAIGN

REF: NICOSIA 839

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L.Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In clear contrast to DISY leader Nikos Anastasiades (Reftel), AKEL Secretary General Dimitris Christofias avoided tactical discussions and stuck to electoral generalities in his October 18 meeting with the Ambassador. February's presidential elections were distant, Christofias counseled, and AKEL's legendary "syspeirosy" -- its party discipline and ability to get out the vote -- would reach or surpass historic norms, quelling alarmists' worries. Nonetheless, defeating Tassos Papadopoulos looked difficult, what with an incumbent's natural advantages and this president's near-complete control over Cypriot media. Turning to the Cyprus Problem, Christofias welcomed the President's newfound flexibility but wondered whether his horrible image amongst Turkish Cypriots precluded real movement. The AKEL candidate claimed to enjoy closer ties across the Green Line, owing to his efforts to cultivate contacts with T/C leaders, not villainize them publicly. Christofias expected little short-term movement on CyProb negotiations; to blame were the Cypriot electoral calendar and Turkey's preoccupation elsewhere. END SUMMARY.

What...Me Worry?

12. (C) Christofias the candidate had not abandoned his day job completely, he asserted. "I'm trying proceed on the campaign while also continuing contacts with Turkish Cypriots and seeking movement on the Cyprus Problem." In response to the Ambassador's queries over recent polling results that showed the AKEL SG trailing Tassos Papadopoulos, Christofias cautioned the race had barely begun. AKEL cohesion rates would rise as Election Day neared, he confidently predicted,

and opponents who believed large numbers of Communist voters would abandon the party's candidate were indulging in wishful thinking. AKEL intended to shake the trees for every possible vote; last year, it had flown 5000 Cypriots home from Athens in the elections run-up, an operation it intended to repeat in February. Five thousand voters equated to three percent of the Cypriot electorate, a significant sum, he reminded.

13. (C) Christofias admitted that Papadopoulos looked tough to beat. Defeating a sitting president never was easy, but one with almost Stalinesque control over the media (our appraisal, not his) was particularly challenging, he continued. The AKEL SG took solace in noting that Dias Group head Costas Hadjicostis, one of Cyprus's most potent media barons, had declared his neutrality in the presidential race. "Hadjicostis normally hammers AKEL, so this is a victory of sorts," Christofias reasoned.

Using the CyProb for Political Gain

14. (C) Papadopoulos's ability to dictate the pace and nature of Cyprus Problem negotiations comprised an additional electoral advantage, Christofias contended. In response to the Ambassador expressing his satisfaction that the President and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat had met September 5 but also his doubt that serious negotiations would commence before the elections, he only half-jokingly responded "I hope you're right!" Christofias's contacts in the north rarely concealed their scorn for the Greek Cypriot leader, whom they considered an untrustworthy, intransigent interlocutor. Interestingly, Christofias chose not to label the President's recently-unveiled CyProb initiatives (Septel) as political sleight-of-hand, as he has alleged recently in public fora. Rather, the AKEL leader voiced hope that Papadopoulos's efforts might spur some negotiating movement and convince T/Cs to scale back their all-out efforts at securing political recognition, evidenced most recently by the seemingly-successful wooing of Syria to establish sea links between Famagusta and Latakia.

15. (C) In Dimitris Christofias the Turkish Cypriots would find a reasonable negotiating partner, the AKEL candidate asserted. He beamed over his long-term contacts with T/C party leaders, and recounted how United Cyprus Party chairman Izzet Izcan recently had accompanied him to the Karpass Peninsula for meetings with Greek Cypriot enclaved. Politicians from numerous parties on both sides continued to meet under the auspices of the local Slovak Embassy, and Christofias insisted that a bizonal, bicomunal federation remained the desired end-state, not partition or confederation. Regrettably, Talat faced pressures no G/C politician must endure, namely, those of the Turkish Army.

Island Not High on Mainland Priority List

16. (C) Ankara's demands likely underpin the T/C leader's growing stubbornness and hardening line, Christofias wagered; he refused to believe his former comrade had "turned" on his own. Despite its historic, heavy hand in the north, however, he predicted Turkey would back off slightly, due mainly to leaders' focus on the Kurdish problem, a potential Iraq cross-border operation, and the U.S. Congress's Armenian Genocide Resolution. Ankara should also return its gaze to European Union accession negotiations, Christofias argued. A Turkey squarely on the EU membership track benefited no country more than Cyprus, he acknowledged. Yet Ankara must change to fit the Union, not demand that Brussels compromise to meet the demands of one, albeit large, applicant.

COMMENT

17. (C) We had hoped Christofias would drop his guard and

discuss AKEL's thoughts on recapturing the 15 percent of its membership allegedly favoring Papadopoulos's candidacy; the Communists' mistrust of U.S. intentions dies hard, however, and meetings with AKEL rarely venture into the weeds like similar sessions with DISY. Shoring up the base must constitute Christofias's Job 1, since without high cohesion and turnout, his chances of advancing to the second round look low. Papadopoulos won't make this easy. In floating his recent proposals on CBMs and the July 8 process, for example, the President undoubtedly took aim at that chunk of the "AKEL 15" who, while opposed to his hard-line policies, are politically risk-averse and unsure a Communist can win in February. Christofias's response to the measures -- calling on Papadopoulos not to table CyProb initiatives during the election run-up, lest the T/C side and/or international community deem them electorally-motivated -- predictably fell flat and drew an immediate, successful RoC rebuttal. He'll need better talking points in the future.

SCHLICHER